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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY AND CARPENTER); NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS) AND DRL (BARKS-RUGGLES)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/24/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: MOHAMMED ABBOU RELEASED

REF: TUNIS 293

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) Summary: Lawyer and civil society activist Mohamed Abbou was released on July 24 and, for the first time in over two years, returned home to his family. Abbou told Pol/EconCouns he was extremely grateful to the United States for keeping his case alive and for looking after his family. The USG and international and domestic NGOs had all called repeatedly for the release of Abbou, who was jailed in 2005 after posting two Internet articles critical of the GOT, President Ben Ali and his family. As is typical on national holidays, it was announced on July 25 (the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the Tunisian republic) that President Ben Ali issued a presidential pardon. In addition to Abbou, civil society contacts report that about twenty political prisoners associated with the banned an-Nahdha party were also released. For suggested press guidance on the release see para 6. End Summary.

12. (C) Mohamed Abbou was sentenced in 2005 to a three and a half year in prison on charges of defaming the judiciary and posing a threat to public order (1.5 year sentence). The sentence stemmed from an on-line article Abbou wrote comparing Tunisian prisons to Abu Ghraib. There was also a separate charge of assault (2 year sentence). Following his imprisonment, his wife Samia was the subject of regular police harassment and surveillance (reftel). During his imprisonment, Abbou repeatedly engaged in hunger strikes in protest of his conviction and the conditions of his detention. Samia Abbou's weekly visits with her husband at a prison almost three hours from Tunis were frequently disrupted by plainclothes police.

13. (C) In a July 25 telcon with Pol/EconCouns, Mohamed Abbou expressed gratitude to the United States for "keeping his case alive" and for looking after his family while he was in prison. Asked about his health, he reported that, now that he was with his family, he had no worries. He reported that his release was "without conditions," such as house arrest or other administrative controls. (Note: Such controls have often been placed on other released political prisoners. End Note.) He also said that he is in possession of his valid passport. Abbou agreed to meet with EmbOffs in the near future.

14. (C) Tunisian and international civil society circles were abuzz with the news of Abbou's release. Several human rights groups issued press releases welcoming his release "with relief and happiness." Mokhtar Trifi, President of the Tunisian Human Rights League, told PolOff on July 25 that a group of human rights activists met Abbou when he arrived at home on July 24. Although he looked thin, Trifi said that Abbou was in good spirits. "Hopefully this will be a step forward" for freedom and democracy in Tunisia, said Trifi.

Separately, Lotfi Hajji, president of the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate, told PolOff on July 25 that Tunisian civil society was overjoyed with the news, as "activists belong in civil society, not prison." Hajji also confirmed that approximately twenty other "political prisoners" associated with the banned an-Nahdha political party were also released, although the specific details have yet to be confirmed.

15. (C) Comment. For over two years, Abbou was a cause celebre for the Tunisian and international human rights community that highlighted the contradictions of GOT rhetoric about democracy and freedom of expression. The USG, including Embassy officials at all levels, repeatedly pressed for Abbou's release both publicly and privately at the highest levels of the GOT. His release is a significant development, and a sign that those in the GOT who are pressing for greater liberalization and freedom were able to convince Ben Ali that his imprisonment only damaged Tunisia's image. End Comment.

16. (U) Suggested press guidance text:

-- The USG welcomes the release of activist lawyer Mohamed Abbou by the Tunisian Government on July 24.

-- The release of Mr. Abbou represents an important milestone for human rights and freedom of expression in Tunisia.

-- We welcome this development and urge the Government of Tunisia to continue to taking steps consistent with its declared intentions to pursue democratic reform, and allow greater freedom of expression and association.
GODEC